

State cuts allowable mercury in Bay

- **Water board votes 5-0 to approve cleanup measure that will affect sewer plants, mine in hills near San Jose**

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CONTRA COSTA TIMES
Contra Costa Times

Article Launched:

SACRAMENTO -- A state water board on Tuesday adopted stricter mercury limits for San Francisco Bay in a move aimed at protecting people who eat fish from the Bay and wild birds that breed around its shoreline.

Using a relatively new tool that focuses on all causes of a pollutant in an environment rather than one source at a time, the state board enacted a daily maximum load of mercury for the entire Bay stretching from Carquinez Strait to the Golden Gate.

The board also enacted a standard limiting the mercury allowed in Bay fish tissue and in the eggs of nesting birds.

"This is a good day for the health of the Bay," said Sejal Choksi, director of programs for the San Francisco Baykeeper, an environmental group. "This provides a long-term framework for reducing the serious problem we have with mercury in San Francisco Bay."

Heavy mercury loads in the Bay -- much of it from mines dug long ago -- have resulted in health warnings for humans to limit consumption of Bay fish. Mercury can cause birth defects in people, and it can retard development of birds.

The 5-0 adoption by the State Water Resources Control Board culminated 10 years of debate and planning over how to tackle the problem.

The Oakland-based San Francisco Regional Water Quality Control Board adopted mercury standards in 2005, but the state board in Sacramento rejected them, saying they were too weak.

The regional panel went back to the drawing board and came up with a stricter new plan that won acceptance by the Sacramento-based board as a model for tackling pollution problems.

John Muller, chairman of the Oakland-based regional board, said Tuesday that he was glad to get the mercury standards in place so his agency can "get on with the business of the cleanup of mercury in our regional water basin."

Mercury has many diverse sources, and once it gets in water and sediment, it can take decades to wash out of the Bay and into the sea.

Pollution washed out of old mines dating to the Gold Rush era is thought to be the biggest source of mercury in the Bay, scientists say.

To attack that problem, the regional board is planning measures to clean up or prevent movement of mercury-laden sediment that flows from an old mine in the hills above San Jose into the Guadalupe River.

Mercury-laden sediment also has been cleaned up in Castro Cove off the industrialized Richmond shoreline, engineers say

The new plan calls for all Bay Area sewer plants to cut mercury in their treated effluent by at least 20 percent in 10 years. Some plants also will be required to make another 10 percent cut during the 10 years after that.

"This is a big task," said Michele Pla, executive director of a coalition of public sewer plant operators called the Bay Area Clean Water Agencies.

She said the sewer operators plan to step up efforts to persuade consumers and businesses not to use products with mercury, or to dispose of them so they stay out of the Bay.

The sewer agencies may do more to get dentists not to flush fillings with mercury down the drain, where they can migrate to the Bay.

The sewer plant operators also may push for reduced use of electrical switches and fluorescent lights that have mercury.

"We're talking about moving away from a society that uses mercury in its products," Pla said.

The regional water board also has ordered the five East Bay oil refineries to conduct studies to identify what happens to the mercury that enters the plants in crude oil.

Pollution engineers suspect that some of the mercury may leave plant smokestacks as air pollution, settle back to earth and wash into the Bay.

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